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# ***Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn***

## **BY ASEF BAYAT**

*Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn*

By Asef Bayat (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 291 pp. Price PB \$21.95. ISBN 0-8047-5595-7.

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*Journal of Islamic Studies*, Volume 19, Issue 2, May 2008, Pages 297–299, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.westminster.ac.uk/10.1093/jis/etn012>

**Published:**

01 May 2008

**Issue Section:**

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Professor Asef Bayat first coined the term ‘post-Islamism’ in a 1996 essay to describe the nascent reform movement in Iran, and it caught on like wild fire. This was a sign that he had captured a significant insight that many of those working in the field were struggling to articulate. In this book, he clarifies further what the phenomenon denotes. According to Bayat, post-Islamism refers both to a condition, signalling a phase in which ‘the appeal, energy and sources of legitimacy of Islamism are exhausted’, and a project, ‘a conscious attempt to conceptualize and strategize the rationale and modalities of transcending Islamism’. The definition of Islamism itself is not advanced with a similar precision, but is described in terms of being a reaction of the marginalized to the dominant forces of modernity and a project seeking to set up an ‘ideological community’, including the establishment of an Islamic state and implementing Islamic laws and moral codes. It is also contrasted to post-Islamism in terms of being a social movement ‘with a conservative moral vision, populist language, patriarchal disposition, and adherence to scripture.’

The prime example of a post-Islamist movement, the author tells us, is the multifaceted reform movement in Iran. It consisted in the rise of youth and feminist groups and vibrant intellectual trends that challenged the dominant official conservative interpretation of Islam in favour of a more inclusive and democratic social and political vision. The movement became so powerful that its leaders took over the presidency and parliament in the 1997 elections. However, while the movement has achieved success in shifting the religious and political discourse, it was ultimately defeated by the conservatives. The latter used their control of the judiciary and the coercive state apparatus to foil the reforms, imprison leading figures in the reform movement, close down newspapers and research centres and ultimately banish the reformers from government.

Bayat contrasts Iran's experience with that of Egypt, where a secular regime confronted a rising Islamist tide. He poses an important and telling question: Why has Iran experienced an Islamic revolution in spite of its vibrant economy and powerful internationally supported state, while Egypt, 'with similar international allies but a weaker economy, large impoverished middle class, and a more liberal political system, fell short of a revolution and experienced only an Islamist movement?'

In attempting to answer this question, Bayat emphasizes the contrast between the trajectories of the two countries and societies, arguing strongly against the dominant view that Iran did have an Islamic movement which helped the revolution. His claims about the weakness of the pre-revolutionary Islamic movement in Iran may find corroboration in the fact that Ayatollah Khomeini deplored in the introduction to his book *Islamic Government* (1971) the way in which the true understanding of Islam was absent even among the ulema and the educated. Nevertheless, it might be an exaggeration to say that Iran did not have a significant Islamic movement.

In Egypt, by contrast, where the clergy has been coopted by the state (unlike the case in Iran) a strong Islamist movement emerged, which became the vehicle of the discontents of the marginalized and the dispossessed. It acquired the character of a powerful social movement, succeeding in

achieving ideological hegemony in society. So much so that even the state had to bow down and support part of the Islamist agenda, albeit while holding on to control. Thus in Egypt, Islamism remained the vehicle for articulating dissent against the secular pro-Western regime, while in Iran post-Islamism expressed the dissent against an Islamist state. However, as Bayat argues, the hegemony of Islamism has even reached to the upper classes and the elite.

In spite of stirrings of post-Islamism in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East, Bayat argues that, apart from Turkey, it has remained on the margin. And post-Islamism is in disarray even in Iran, where it failed to achieve its objectives, causing disillusionment and frustration among its followers. Bayat concludes that while post-Islamism is promising and points the way to 'democratising Islam', its promise remains just that—a promise.

Bayat's book is a very stimulating and informative work, if only because of his rich expertise in the two case studies. As an Iranian who lived through the Islamic revolution, and as an academic who had lived and worked in Egypt for many years, he is well placed to give us the inside story on both countries, one greatly enriched by direct observations and personal insights.

The most important contention of this book (the one enshrined in the title) is that it is pointless to ask the question: Are Islam and democracy compatible? For the way in which sacred injunctions are implemented is a matter of struggle and competing readings. As the Iranian post-Islamists have shown, even the conservative and deeply anti-democratic Iranian Islamic constitution could be reinterpreted to cause an exuberant democratic movement to flourish.

The Achilles heel of the work, however, is its diffuse definition of Islamism, and the characterization of it as a protest movement for the marginalized. This conflicts with his other assessment that in both Iran and Egypt, Islamism is becoming the ideology of the powerful. But, more important, if Islamism is the protest of the downtrodden, what is post-Islamism offering that could both end the marginalization of the excluded majority and also satisfy the elite?

And why does the usage seek to deny Iran's post-Islamists their own claim that, in fact, they were the genuine Islamists?

Of less significance is the fact that the book is marred by a few but irritating errors of spelling or translation. Less forgiveable are such errors as describing Eid Al-Adha as the 'Muslim New Year.' Subsequent editions (and there are likely to be many) should take care of these small problems.

That said, the book is an important and distinguished addition to the debate on democratization in the Muslim world, and has already stimulated a lively discussion that promises to cast light on an important subject. This can be said of only a very few works these days.

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